Introduction

Origins of the New Testament Canon

The Lord Jesus Christ, while fulfilling his earthly ministry, spoke these words of promise to his faithful followers:

> "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:25 – 26 NIV)

At another time, speaking to these same disciples, the Savior said:

> "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you." (John 16:13 – 14)

A proper understanding of the New Testament Canon's historical development and origins must start with the promises quoted above. Though often weak and sinful, the appointed Apostles of Jesus Christ, by the power and assistance given to them by the promised Spirit of Truth, were entrusted with the responsibility to communicate and witness, both orally and in written form, the words and work of the Son of God. To accomplish this God-ordained work, the Spirit would "teach" and "remind" them of the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition, this same Spirit of Truth would reveal things that were "yet to come."

The witness of the Apostles, provided directly by the Holy Counsellor, was intended from the beginning to be authoritative. These words were God given to the Apostles and, therefore, were unquestionably the authoritative Word of God. The Apostles were conscious of the awesome and weighty responsibility given to them. That the Apostle Paul understood the importance and the authority entrusted to him is seen clearly by what he writes in his letter to the church at Corinth:

> "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command." (I Corinthians 14:37)

The Apostle Paul's words to the churches were the "Lord's commands." They were to be received as if they were spoken directly by the Lord Jesus himself! This would explain why the Apostle was anxious to have his letters read in the various early churches. One can hear the urgency in his words as he writes to the ancient church in Asia Minor at Colosse and the church at Thessalonica:

> "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn, read the letter from Laodicea." (Colossians 4:16)
>
> "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers." (I Thessalonians 5:27)

Finally, the Apostle Peter puts his stamp of approval on the writings of Paul by claiming that they are indeed "Scripture." As such, they are inherent with God-given authority. Peter writes:

> "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."[1] (II Peter 3:15 – 16)

The Scripture references cited provide clear evidence that the Apostles of Jesus Christ were invested with the authority to speak and write in the name of Jesus Christ. In light of this commission, their teaching was to be received as if spoken by God. In addition, these references certify that the Apostles were cognizant that this authority was given to them by inspiration. In obedience to their calling, they commenced to witness both by word of mouth and written word. This paper will contend that church leaders who succeeded the appointed Apostles recognized this God-given authority and inspiration. As a result, they sought to preserve their writings at all costs. This ultimately led to the formation of the New Testament Canon. It is this authority and inspiration ("God-breathed"), which was the fundamental criteria used by the early church to build the Canon.

> "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (I Timothy 3:16)

The great task then for the early church was to prayerfully recognize what was "God-breathed" and what was not.

This paper aims to highlight God's wonderful workings in the development of the New Testament canon. Providence has rightly been called a great mystery, but as a man looks back with an eye of faith to the historical record, he must marvel at the work of God in preserving his holy word. This study will seek to present the variety of means God used, in his infinite

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[1] Wayne Grudem, in his Systematic Theology, points out that the word Peter used for "Scriptures" is a word that occurs fifty-one times in the New Testament and that it refers to the Old Testament Scriptures in every one of those occurrences. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2000) Page 61

wisdom, to stir up his people to the vital task of assembling his written revelation. We begin our study from the time after the Apostles died and will conclude at the time when there were general agreements in orthodox Christendom as to which written documents belonged to the body of works we now call the New Testament. It is a study that speaks volumes as to the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love that the redeemed in Christ have for the Word of God, and the sovereign preserving hand of an Almighty God!

Early Post-Apostolic Era

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, there were many contributing factors in the long but certain path in adding a second canon. Early Christians, in the first two centuries, recognized that Old Testament scriptures, so often quoted by the Lord Jesus and his apostles, were the authoritative word of God. The example of an already existing body of inspired writings found in the Old Testament no doubt served as a model for an additional "new" collection of inspired writing. This would have certainly been solidified in their minds following the Jewish Council of Jamnia in the year 90 AD. Although the Old Testament canon was completed hundreds of years earlier, this council publicly ratified the books we call the Old Testament today. The Encyclopedia Judaica states,

> "The next major piece of evidence to be noted is the Council of Jamnia, which seems to have taken place around 90 AD. This council established and closed the canon authoritatively for nearly all Jews. It has been their canon ever since." [2]

No doubt Christians, many of whom would have come from Jewish origins, would have taken note of this council's action. In the not-too-distant future, a concerted effort will begin to establish concise lists that will one day also comprise another final set of inspired writings.

Early Writings – Authority and Inspiration Recognized

The historical record is abundant with accounts showing the early church's recognition of authoritative and inspired writings. Church leaders were careful to acknowledge that the sayings of the Lord and the writings of his apostles were authoritative in and of themselves aside from the pronouncements of men. Early writers acknowledged that Jesus had supreme authority and that the apostles had parity with the Old Testament prophets. Time after time, the early writers would quote

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[2] Encyclopedia Judaica Volume 6 Page 1147 – Taken from "The Old Testament Canon" Online at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/sbrandt/canon.htm

Old Testament passages and then often, in the next sentence, quote a word from the Gospel or some other work destined to be part of the New Testament canon. F.F. Bruce directs his readers to the writings of Clement of Rome, who clearly believed that the words of the Lord Jesus were as authoritative as the Old Testament scripture. This equality between the words of the Savior and the Old Testament prophets is clearly demonstrated below:

> "Clement of Rome, in his letter to the Corinthian church (AD 96), quotes the words of Jesus as being at least on a level of authority with those of the prophets. 'The Holy Spirit says', he states, introducing a conflated quotation from Jeremiah 9:23f. and 1 Samuel 2:10 ('Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom nor the strong man in his strength nor the rich man in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in the Lord, to seek him out and to practice judgment and righteousness'), and then he goes on: 'especially remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, "Be merciful, so that you may obtain mercy…"'(with further quotations from the Sermon on the Mount)."[3]

Another example can be found in the writings of Theophilus, the famous Bishop of Antioch, in the late second century. This bishop was known for his great reverence for the Old Testament scriptures. In fact, Theophilus testified that he was converted to Christ by reading the Old Testament prophets. Metzger highlights the great regard Theophilus had for the gospels, in addition to the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Again, we see this parity between prophets of old and new. Speaking of Theophilus, Metzger writes:

> "Once he quotes a statement that comes from Luke (18:27). To him, the Evangelists were not less inspired by the Holy Spirit than the prophets of the Old Testament: 'Confirmatory utterances are found both with the prophets and in the gospels. The Gospel, according to Matthew is to him the 'holy word.' Theophilus explicitly mentions John by name as one of 'those who were spirit-bearing'…"[4]

Many additional examples could be cited that demonstrate how the early church believed God was providing written revelation through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This recognition of authority and inspiration would play a crucial role in the development of the New Testament canon.

Role of Oral Traditions

When the Apostles passed from this world, faithful believers were tasked with remaining true to the apostolic witness. Some evidence exists that in the late first and early second centuries, Christians were content to pass down the teachings of the Lord and his Apostles orally. The historical record indicates that as long as there were eyewitnesses who knew the Apostles and who could convey their teachings, the urgency for obtaining or making copies of written material was

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[3] F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic 1988) Page 121

[4] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987) Page 118

not the highest priority. This would change very soon, but early on, preference may have been given to those who knew an Apostle directly and could receive their teaching firsthand. One often-cited example in early Church History is in an account of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, in AD 125. Papias wrote:

> "If ever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, were saying. I did not think that information from books would help me so much as the utterances of a living and surviving voice."[5]

Gamble, commenting on this time period and in conjunction with the words of Papias, writes:

> "So, although Papias knew written gospels, he did not defer to them but preferred oral tradition. This tradition was too well established to be completely displaced by written materials, and it continued to maintain a considerable authority alongside written gospels well into the second century."[6]

Of course, one practical consideration to this matter of preferring oral tradition was the limitation of available copies of the four gospels and the various apostolic writings. This limitation would have naturally meant that the Word of God would have spread via word of mouth quicker than via written material because making written copies was a time-consuming and laborious task.

Role of "Spurious Books"

The famous early church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, classified early church writings into four helpful categories or classes.[7] The first class was the "*recognized*" class of books. This class comprised material that, without question, was recognized by the early church as the inspired Word of God. The second class was known as the "*disputed*" class. These books, such as Hebrews, James, Jude, II Peter, II, and III John, were sometimes considered questionable with regard to the

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[5] Metzger, *The Canon Page* 52 - Quoting from Eusebius, *Hist. eccl* III. xxxix 4. There is some debate on the usage of the term "books." It is unknown if the bishop referred to recent written materials or Old Testament books.

[6] Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon – Its Making and Meaning*. (Philadelphia Fortress Press 1987) Page 26

[7] Material taken from "The Development of the Canon of the New Testament" –Online at http://www.ntcanon.org/Eusebius.shtml

inspiration of God. The third class was known as "*spurious*" books. Though NOT ultimately considered the Word of God, these books had some devotional usefulness in the church. The final class, "*heretical,"* were those writings recognized as dangerous due to the false teachings in which they contained. It is the third class, or "spurious books," that we draw attention to in reference to the development of the New Testament Canon. These books, often warm in devotion to Christ and filled with exhortations to godly Christian living, played an important role in the early church and canon formation. Books such as the allegorical Shepherd of Hermes, the Didache, and the Epistle of Barnabas were often used even within the early church worship services. These are just a few of the writings that were replete with references to passages in the Old Testament, the sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles. One example is the early church manual for order and Christian living is called the Didache, or "teaching." Metzger, commenting on the Didache writes:

> "Apart from such explicit quotations, the Didache also contains three separate references to what the Lord commanded in the Gospel and echoes from several other New Testament books. An analysis of these reminiscences shows that the Gospel, according to Matthew, was the chief source for the author's knowledge of the teaching of Jesus, but alongside this written gospel, he was also familiar with phrases from oral tradition.[8]

Now, an important question the early church had to answer was whether these "spurious" books should be considered equal in authority to the writings of the Apostles. How should they decide what was and was not inspired?

In the course of the first few centuries, it was not uncommon to find some of these spurious books making their way to the lists of men who considered these lists to be the Word of God. For example, we know that Irenaeus, Bishop in Gaul and disciple of the famous martyr Polycarp, kept a list that included the "Shepherd of Hermes." This list also included the gospels and Paul's letters. Origen, a teacher in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early third century, had a list that included the Didache.

In various locations, some incorrectly considered one "spurious" work entitled the "Epistle of Barnabas" on par with Scripture. Souter comments on this letter:

> "The Epistle of Barnabas " had something like a canonical position in Egypt. In his Hypotyposes, or commentary on the Catholic Epistles, of which only fragments have survived, Clement of Alexandria commented on it. Origen calls it "catholic," a term which

[8] Metzger, *The Canon* 50

> he elsewhere applies to I Peter and I John and which, for practical purposes, may be identified with 'canonical.' "[9]

This epistle was later rejected as non-canonical, but it is important to recognize that a process was undertaken before these books were recognized as not "God-breathed."

These spurious books served a very useful value in the early church simply because a determination had to be made as to what did and did not come from the Holy Spirit. Many men asserted what they considered to be the inspired Word of God. Many "lists" were being developed. In the sovereign providence of God, the early Christian church was "forced" to make important decisions regarding the true revelation of God. Contrasts had to be made between the authoritative Word and these other works. We shall see that other events, such as persecution and false teachings, would also "push" the church into recognizing Scripture.

Role of Technological Advancements

In God's wise providence and timing, at the end of the first century and early second century, Christians began to adopt a new method for collecting writings into one document. This was possible due to great advancements in the technology of bookmaking. This advancement, known as the codex, gradually replaced the common scroll. Unlike scrolls, which were big and bulky and had limited written words on one side of the material, the codex design provided a leaf-style book format. This format allowed written words on both sides of the material. This invention made it much easier to handle and store written material. Metzger notes the following:

> As long as Christians used the roll to transmit their sacred books, the four Gospels or the Pauline Epistles could be collected only by assembling several rolls in the same box or chest. When, however, the codex form of the book was adopted, several or even all of the separate documents of what came to be called the New Testament could be physically assembled in one volume."[10]

This very practical matter greatly expedited the advancement of a collection of written documents, including the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and various letters. Of course, this invention did not influence what books were ultimately placed in the New Testament canon, but it did greatly aid the ability to collect the recognized Word of God into one source location.

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[9] Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*. (New York: Scribner 1917) Page 179

[10] Ibid 109

The invention of the codex also played a significant role in duplicating multiple copies of inspired books into one collection. Thus, early in the second century, the four gospels and the epistles of the Apostle Paul could often be found grouped together into one collection of writings. This would greatly assist the early church in their quest to have a balanced knowledge of the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and his Apostles. F. F. Bruce writes:

> "What is important is this: from the early second century onward, Paul's letters circulated singly and as a collection. It was as a collection that Christians of the second century and later knew them, both orthodox and heterodox. The codex into which the letters were copied by their first editor constituted a master copy on which all subsequent copies of the letters were based."[11]

It is a fascinating side note to see how, often, in history, the technical advancements of men led to the greater expansion of the Word of God. One can also point to the invention of the great printing press in the 15th century. Under the good providence of God, this invention multiplied thousands of times over the written Word of God under the leadership of such men as William Tyndale. How good the sovereign God has been to use the inventions of mere men to advance into the hands of mankind, his eternal truth!

Trials Without

The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing sometime in the late second century, made the famous observation that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." While it may not have been his primary intention, Tertullian's words are relevant to the development of the New Testament Canon. We learn early in the biblical narrative that persecutions, although perpetrated by sinful individuals, can and are used by God for His eternal purposes. Like Joseph of old, who was persecuted by his brothers and sold into Egyptian slavery, the events of his time ultimately served the glory of the Sovereign Lord. After their father's death, Joseph speaks to his brothers, reflecting back with a perspective of faith and says:

> "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50: 19 -20)

Joseph, having faced many trials and overcome them by the grace of God, knew that his earlier evil experiences had definite meaning and purpose. He later recognized that the sovereign God directed his affairs.

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[11] Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* 130

The early church was also no stranger to persecution. We learn from Luke that this persecution was also a great means under God to advance the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Speaking after the stoning death of the deacon Stephen, Luke writes:

> "On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." (Acts 8: 1, 4)

Speaking of this advancement of the gospel as a direct result of persecution, in his commentary on the Book of Acts, F.F. Bruce writes:

> "The persecution and dispersion, however, brought about a beginning of the fulfillment of our Lord's commission to His disciples in Chapter 1:8: "ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and all Judaea and Samaria…"[12]

The trials the early church endured led to the advancement of Christ's redeeming work. What was true in the spreading of the gospel because of the displacement of the disciples in the first century was also true in post-apostolic times in the formation of the New Testament canon. The fires of persecution presented important choices to the early church. Confronted with punishment or even death, only the true Word of God could provide the hope and encouragement they needed!

The Role of Persecution and the Scriptures

In the first few centuries after Christ, the early church was confronted with various periods of persecution. Early on, as we learn from the Book of Acts, Jewish authorities were the primary source of persecution. Acts 12 reveals to us that King Herod had James, the brother of John, put to death by the sword. This was to the delight of the Jewish leadership. Many more persecutions would follow. Most historians set the dates of Jewish persecution from 33 AD to 64 AD. Following the period of Jewish persecution, the governing authorities of the day, the Roman Empire, initiated a persecution campaign of their own. These dates are generally agreed to have started under Nero in 64 AD and ended with the reign of the emperor Constantine in the early 4th century. At times throughout these centuries, persecution was local. Other times, persecution was global.

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[12] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts, The New International Commentary on the* New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, reprint 1983, 175

It was during one particularly brutal reign that Christians of the day were faced with some important choices. These choices would ultimately become important factors in determining what was the authoritative Word of God. During the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, a great persecution broke out against Christians. Diocletian issued 4 major edicts during his reign. It is the first edict we draw attention to in reference to our study. This edict, issued in February of 303 AD, required the authorities to destroy all Christian places of worship. In addition, authorities were to destroy all "sacred" books.[13]

Now, one might ask, what does this have to do with the development of the New Testament? The simple answer is that when confronted with surrendering the precious Word of God, believers had to decide what they were willing to give up. For example, if someone had a copy of the four Gospels and had a copy of the Epistle of Barnabas, which one was valued the most? They could satisfy the authorities by surrendering one book and hiding another. This is what, in fact, often took place during this great persecution period. W.H.C Frend makes a very interesting statement. He writes,

[13] "On February 23, 303 AD, Diocletian ordered the newly built church at Nicomedia to be razed. He demanded that its scriptures be burned and seized its precious stores for the treasury. Diocletian's first "Edict against the Christians" was published the next day. The edict ordered the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship across the Empire and prohibited Christians from assembling for worship." Material taken from Wikipedia "Diocletian" – Online at http://www. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletian

> "During the Diocletian persecution, Mensurious, the bishop of Carthage, hid his copies of Scriptures in a safe place, and in their stead handed over to the waiting magistrate's writings of 'the new heretics.' [13]

In another instance of severe persecution, Metzger gives us an account of three women who refused to give up their scriptures at the cost of their lives.

> "In other instances, stiffer resistance is offered when believers were asked to give up their Christian books. In the account of the martyrdom of Agape, Irene, and Chione, at successive hearings, the three women were interrogated by the prefect Dulcitius of Thessalonica, who inquired, 'Do you have in your possession any writings, parchments, or books of the impious Christians?' Chione replied, 'We do not, Sir. Our present emperors have taken these from us. On the next day, when Irene was brought before the court again, the prefect asked, 'Who was it that advised you to retain these parchments and writings up to the present

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[13] W.H.C Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Reprint) 1981, Page 372

> time?' 'It was almighty God,' Irene replied, 'who bade us love him unto death. For this reason, we did not dare to be traitors, but we chose to be burned alive or suffer anything else that might happen to us rather than betray them' (i.e., the writings). After sentencing the young woman to be placed naked in the public brothel, the prefect gave orders that the writings in the cabinets and chest belonging to her were to be burned publicly. The account concludes by describing how, in March and April of the year 304, the three became martyrs for their faith by being burned at the stake."[14]

These trials, endured bravely by so many believers in Christ, were important in progressively determining what should be considered God's eternal truth. Scores of the above examples could be cited. How precious is the Word of God to those who love their Savior! May it be so to both the author of this paper and all who read it!

Trials Within

The Role of False Teaching and the Scriptures

In an earlier section, this study highlighted the role of so-called "spurious" books as they pertained to the formation of the New Testament canon. Similarly, false teaching, often captured in written form through books and articles, played a role in deciding which books should be part of the canon. One particular well-known heresy that spread quickly in the early church was Montanism. This heresy was based on false teachings about the Holy Spirit and his work within man. It insisted that the gift of inspiration and prophecy continued after the apostolic period. Montanism grew in popularity during the middle portion of the second century. Various writings indicate that Montanus, the founder, and his various followers wrote down these teachings and collected them along with the words of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. These writings would ultimately stand in stark contrast to the authoritative true revelation of God. Writing on the Montanus view of continued inspiration, Metzger writes,

> "The insistence on the continuous gift of inspiration and prophecy influenced the Church to emphasize the final authority of apostolic writings as the rule of faith. By rejecting the extravagances of Montanism, the Church took the first step toward the adoption of a closed canon of Scripture."[15]

It is important to emphasize the early date of this movement. The work of carefully selecting what should be and should not be part of God's collected revelation had already begun!

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[14] Metzger, *The Canon* 108
[15] Metzger, *The Canon* 106

Conclusion

Many volumes of books have been published on the important subject of the historical development of the New Testament Canon. This paper has intentionally limited the scope of this subject to focus on highlighting the variety of means, under the good providence of God, used in the establishment of the New Testament Canon. It is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list. We have seen that the church was very early in identifying the components that comprised the true Word of God. We have seen that very early lists were drawn up that closely matched the finalized list that comprised the canon. In the annual Easter letter of 367 AD, the great champion of Nicene Orthodoxy, Athanasius, listed the exact 27 books that now comprise our New Testament! The process to get there was never in doubt, for it was never dependent on the will or power of man but rather on the will and power of God the Holy Spirit.

> "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (II Peter 1:21)

All praise and thanks to our great God and King for His holy Word!

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